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ABSTRACT

In Canada, Aboriginal people remain highly disadvantaged relative to the general population. Structural factors operate in conjunction with cultural factors and other social practices like racism, such that they cannot be explained away through conventional analysis and isolated interventions. Schooling for Aboriginal people must incorporate and maintain Aboriginal cultures and prepare students for success in modern society. The strongest benefits are observed when Aboriginal culture is integrated into all aspects of programming and school culture, regardless of improvements fostered by specific initiatives or interventions. Teachers and administrators successful in working with Aboriginal students and communities are those who maintain active engagement with their learners. This involvement requires continual sensitivity to cultural and social factors outside and inside the school setting, open and caring relations with students, and the ability to serve as facilitator and counsellor rather than purely as instructor. Regardless of the extent of agreement on principles of Aboriginal control over education, it is essential to alleviate real obstacles that hamper effective control. Education systems and their personnel must be sensitive to special needs and forms of diversity in communities in which Aboriginal people live. Three case studies illustrate how successful Aboriginal schools focus not just on educational factors, but on structural and economic ones such as emotional and physical safety, achievable day-to-day tasks, democracy, personal and collective justice, and a comfortable physical environment. (Contains 111 references.) (TD)

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Marginalization, Decolonization and Voice: Prospects for Aboriginal Education in Canada

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Discussion Paper
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Abstract

The paper addresses the causes and implications of, and possible solutions to, the "education gap" between Aboriginal people and the general population in Canada. Our analysis highlights how structural and processual aspects of education interact to serve, alternatively, as barriers and contributing factors to the success of Aboriginal students. Adequate understanding of, and action to address, the education gap requires sensitivity to the relationships among cultures, education systems and the social context in which schooling is situated. Social differentiation within Aboriginal populations as well as between populations must be factored into analysis. Relevant factors include cultural teachings and material, educational personnel, resources, governance, and community linkages. We illustrate how these factors can be related holistically with reference to specific schools that have demonstrated remarkable success in working with Aboriginal students. In formulating policy considerations and questions for further research, we conclude that formal education systems must acknowledge that, while unique cultural resources are important to the education of Aboriginal students, Aboriginal people also wish to be equipped with knowledge and skills required for success by conventional standards. Fulfillment of these objectives requires a combination of basic and special initiatives.

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The "Education Gap" Between Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal People in Canada

Conventional educational indicators highlight pronounced disadvantages experienced by Aboriginal people relative to the general population (see especially the 1996 report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples). The 1996 census reveals that, among persons aged fifteen and over, 53.6 per cent of Aboriginal people have less than high school education, compared with 23.9 per cent of the comparable population in Canada, while only 3.3 per cent of Aboriginal people have a university degree, as opposed to 17.0 per cent of the general population (Statistics Canada, 1998). Earlier data show that, among those aged 15 to 49, about two-thirds of the Aboriginal population, compared to less than half of the general population, did not complete high school (Wotherspoon, 1998: 173); Gilbert *et al.* (1993: 23) report that 40 per cent of Aboriginal youth aged 18 to 20 were early school leavers compared to 16 per cent of the total 18 to 20 year old population; moreover, only one-quarter of Aboriginal school leavers reported returning to high school compared to nearly half of all school leavers (Assembly of First Nations, 1998: 1). Despite increased enrollment by Aboriginal students in postsecondary institutions, rates levelled off in the mid-1990s, with 6.9 per cent of Registered Indians enrolled in full-time postsecondary programs in 1995-96 compared with a rate of 11.0 per cent for all people in Canada in the same cohort (Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, 1998: 32-33). Comparable statistics in a wide range of studies (see especially Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996: Volume 3) reveal that, despite some encouraging signs towards slowing or reversing these trends, the education gap remains one of the most critical problems facing Aboriginal people in Canada.

Consequences and Implications of the Education Gap

At least as much as for other people in Canada, increased educational attainment for Aboriginal people plays a critical role in improved labour market integration, employment prospects, earnings, and reduction of dependence on government transfers (Armstrong, Kennedy and Oberle, 1990; Jankowski and Moazzami, 1995: 109-110; Santiago, 1997: 32; Saskatchewan Treaty Indians, 1993). In 1995, for instance, the average employment income of Aboriginal people was one-third less than the national average, with lower earnings in every age and education category; however, for those with university degrees,

the gap dropped to twenty-five per cent (Statistics Canada, 1998: 10-11). As the Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations (1997: 87) warns, "an Aboriginal economic gap" characterized by unemployment, income deficiencies, and underutilized productivity will be reproduced without major improvements in educational success rates.

Undereducation compounds itself over time, as the lack of qualified or trained learners at any given level restricts the pool of applicants for higher education, skilled training, and highly skilled and professional employment (Working Margins Consulting Group, 1992: 50). Increasing numbers of highly trained Aboriginal people are required in order to ensure adequate representation within general labour markets, social roles, and political institutions, and to fulfill leadership roles within Aboriginal organizations and enterprises.

The relative youth of the Aboriginal population, compared to the general population, has mixed significance. There is reason for some optimism since recent cohorts of Aboriginal youth are better educated and have access to a wider range of occupational and societal alternatives than previous generations. However, economic disadvantage is likely to be maintained or even increased as long as the attainment of formal educational credentials remains below competitive levels.

In addition to its market relevance, educational success holds important consequences for the social health of Aboriginal people and for those who provide services to that population. Poverty, injury and ill health, violence, alcohol and substance abuse problems, family difficulties and early childhood concerns, and involvement in criminal activities are all strongly interconnected as both barriers to educational success and consequences of educational problems (Canadian Educational Statistics Council, 1996: 68; Schissel, 1997; Wotherspoon, 1998: 184). In the same way that schooling - documented most thoroughly in the residential school experience, but more generally as well - has contributed to the fragmentation of family and community ties, demoralization, and destabilization of individual identities, formal education is also an essential component in strategies to provide Aboriginal people and their communities with confidence and skills for individual and social success.

Theoretical Explanations and Contributing Factors

Social scientific and policy literature concerned with the relatively disadvantaged educational and economic status of Aboriginal people is more descriptive than analytical.

With a few notable exceptions, there has been little attempt to integrate fully an understanding of Aboriginal issues with wider theoretical orientations, as evident in the tendency in mainstream social scientific and educational journals to concentrate the few articles that do appear on Aboriginal education into special thematic issues. We outline below the main orientations to analysis, characterized broadly as individual, cultural, institutional, or social structural in emphasis, before discussing key implications of these analyses.

Individual explanations, which attribute low educational achievement or failure to lack of effort or skill on the part of individual learners, are much less prevalent in the research literature than they once were, in part due to greater sensitivity to the consequences of a "blaming the victim" ideology. Nonetheless, led by high profile studies such as *The Bell Curve* (Herrnstein and Murray, 1994), there continues to be – despite serious limitations - substantial policy interest around the extent to which hereditary or biological factors, combined with individual initiative, can be held responsible for the racialized stratification of education and labour markets in North America.

Cultural factors have been advanced, particularly since the late 1960s, as the predominant explanation of educational performance and problems among Aboriginal people. Initial studies of this nature tended to regard cultural orientations, learning styles, and patterns of interaction exhibited by Aboriginal students as deficient rather than simply as different from the expectations of the mainstream classroom (Deyhle and Swisher, 1997: 117-118). Recent inquiry has stressed a **cultural discontinuity thesis** (Brady, 1996: 12). Conventional educational practices are seen to act as a "critical filter" that blocks hope and self-esteem (Hampton, 1995: 7). Student frustration, alienation, and failure increase when schooling imposes criteria oriented to success in white society, without regard to Aboriginal people's cultural and community traditions (including the legacy of mistrust associated with dispiriting experiences with residential and provincial/territorial schools), and little sensitivity to issues involved in transitions between cultures (Chisholm, 1994: 33-34; Douglas, 1994: 161-162; Gabriel Dumont Institute, 1993: 25; Ryan, 1996; Saskatchewan Education, 1985).

An important redirection of cultural approaches lies in an understanding of culture as a **complex and dynamic** phenomenon rather than a narrowly defined, static set of traditional beliefs and practices (Auger, 1998; Couture, 1996: 43; Kirkness, 1998; Peters, 1996: 309-310; Sarrasin, 1994; Van Hamme, 1996: 26). Battiste (1998: 22) warns that schools' teaching of Aboriginal culture and language will remain superficial and

disconnected if it is not based on a complete understanding of how Indigenous knowledge is deeply rooted in people's lives and consciousness.

It is essential, as well, to take into account the **diversity of indigenous cultures** and experiences. Even where broadly shared world views and orientations to knowledge and social relations are apparent among Aboriginal groups, important differences in experiences and orientations prevail both among diverse Aboriginal people and among individuals within single communities (Maina, 1997: 304-305; McAlpine and Taylor, 1993: 18-19; Roberts, Clifton and Wiseman, 1989: 16-18).

In these latter regards, cultural studies have overlapped with **institutional approaches** that lay the blame for Aboriginal student problems and failure on schools, policies, institutional racism, and other organizational factors that do not accommodate, or even are hostile to, Aboriginal people and cultures. Historically, the *Indian Act*, residential schools, and assimilationist policies undermined indigenous communities and cultural ties, producing marginalization and failure (Jaine, 1993; Miller, 1996; Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, Volume 1, 1996: 365ff.). Legal distinctions have led to diverse forms of status, entitlement, service delivery, and orientations to identity that have led to differentiation and inequality not only between Aboriginal people and the general population, but also among distinct categories and sub-groups of Aboriginal people. Contemporary policies and schooling practices produce similar results by failing to incorporate Aboriginal viewpoints and personnel into curriculum construction and schooling processes (Decore *et al.*, 1981: 32-33; McNinch, 1994: 5-7; Perley, 1992: 5-6), not addressing jurisdictional questions related to First Nations control (McPherson, 1991: 11-12), maintaining policies and regulations that lead to under-representation of Aboriginal people in key decision-making roles on school boards and other bodies (Brady, 1992; Common, 1991: 4-5), and restraining expenditures on education as well as other social programs that further disadvantage First Nations (Angus, 1991: 23-24). Consequently, even students who perform well in band-controlled schools may experience subsequent educational problems due to stereotyping, racism, and an absence of supportive infrastructure if they transfer to provincial/territorial schools (Wilson, 1992: 51, 53). Writers like Perley (1993) contend that the combined impact of these factors, through the maintenance of federal and provincial/territorial control over critical areas of Aboriginal life, reflects the perpetuation of **internal colonialism** in Canada.

Emphasis on **structural factors** like socioeconomic inequality and class structure, gender inequality, segmented labour markets, and systemic racism offers a broader

perspective on the subordination of Aboriginal people (see e.g., Boldt, 1993; Fleras and Elliott, 1996; Frideres, 1998; Ponting, 1997; and Satzewich and Wotherspoon, 1993, for more extended discussion). The education gap between Aboriginal people and the general population is more than cultural conflict between Aboriginal people and mainstream policies and practices. Rather, socioeconomic factors shape the circumstances experienced by substantial segments of the Aboriginal population, including high incidences of family poverty, low socioeconomic status, and structural barriers to employment and social opportunities (Brady, 1996: 15; Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, 1997; Hull, 1990: 11-12; Ross, 1991: 8-9).

Structural inequalities also affect diverse segments of the Aboriginal population in different ways. While there are substantial and ongoing wage disparities between the general Aboriginal and the general population in Canada, the inequalities in wage distribution within the Aboriginal population are greater than average, especially among subgroups like the Inuit and Aboriginal women (Bernier, 1997: 15). Aboriginal women, particularly those in urban areas, face "multiple jeopardy" by virtue of their relatively disadvantaged status with respect to education, labour markets, political structures, and social circumstances (Gerber, 1990: 80; Voyageur, 1996: 106-109; Williams, 1997). At the same time, participation and success in postsecondary education is likely to result in social, economic and political benefits for many Aboriginal women and their families.

This brief overview has revealed a number of shifting currents in the literature on Aboriginal education in Canada. Increasing attention has been paid to cultural, institutional and structural factors, as opposed to those that emphasize deficits in Aboriginal people and indigenous cultures. There are multiple, interrelated causes of educational inequalities. We need to move beyond simple identification of the factors involved in order to analyze the processes through which various elements interact with one another. A lack of integrative analysis, along with minimal comparative analysis, is complicated by the fact that studies tend to focus on isolated contexts (notwithstanding the importance of and need for further case studies), or are limited by existing data bases. The absence of systematic pan-Canadian data and the use of legal categories rather than more comprehensive socioeconomic indicators have tended to restrict comparison or to skew our knowledge base by concentrating research more heavily on particular categories (particularly registered and on-reserve Indians who constitute an identified population) than on broader bases of diversity.

Policy and practice must be formulated to recognize that:

- Aboriginal people remain highly disadvantaged relative to the general population, but not all Aboriginal people occupy the same positions and hold the same value orientations as one another;
- structural factors operate in a complex manner, often in conjunction with cultural factors and other social practices like racism, such they cannot be explained away through conventional analysis and isolated interventions;
- schooling for Aboriginal people, regardless of jurisdiction, must accommodate both the need to incorporate and maintain Aboriginal cultures (through contemporary dimensions as well as traditional ones) and the need to prepare students for success in diverse, complex modern societies (Assembly of First Nations, 1994: 1; Van Hamme, 1996: 21; Maina, 1997: 294; Voyageur, 1992: 43-44). In their acknowledgment of the distinctive features of Aboriginal cultural traditions, beliefs and practices, educators and researchers should not forget that, with the exception of a very few people who adopt a totally traditional orientation to life, Aboriginal learners, parents and communities identify goals and aspirations that are consistent with those of most people in Canada.

Towards Overcoming the Education Gap – What Works and What Doesn't Work

Key determinants of educational success and failure among Aboriginal people, derived from the literature, are examined below in relation to five themes – culture, personnel, resources, governance, and community linkages. The concept of educational success, like culture, is neither fixed nor narrow in scope. Gaskell (1995: 85; 278), reporting on the Exemplary Schools Project for the Canadian Education Association, observes that school success has no single definition or formula; beyond broad acceptance of the general value of and expectations associated with educational credentials, basic knowledge, and disciplinary standards, "the definition of a good student varies from school to school, reflecting the moral and social expectations of parents, teachers and the broader community." Similarly, Renihan *et al.* (1994: 98, 100), assessing the National Stay-in-School Initiative, observe that a diverse range of factors contribute to program effectiveness, with the most common elements the creation of "positive and supportive environments for students," along with a combined focus on academic, occupational, affective, and social development. Successful schools are not determined strictly though selected measures like standardized test scores, retention and graduation rates, or other

indicators that narrow the mandate of schooling to academic matters or economic productivity. Schools must also be assessed in terms of their overall contributions to social justice and human and community development (Connell, 1993; Wotherspoon, 1998).

Comprehensive understanding and incorporation of Aboriginal cultures – Native studies courses, indigenous language instruction, and curricula and resources that include Aboriginal content and perspectives have become increasingly available at all levels of study in most jurisdictions, but strong concern continues to be expressed by Aboriginal organizations and researchers about their limited utilization, scope, and integration (Assembly of First Nations, 1990: 36-37; Assembly of First Nations, 1994: 27; Gabriel Dumont Institute, 1993: 31; Littlejohn and Fredeen, 1993: 59, 78; Toohey, 1985: 98). Schools that do not acknowledge or accommodate Aboriginal culture in their programming, curriculum and personnel produce higher dropout rates, greater levels of school failure, and dissatisfaction with schooling among Aboriginal students, and risk loss of connections with Aboriginal communities. Aboriginal students are further disadvantaged by cultural influences that pervade assumptions and practices related to routine and apparently neutral features of education like attendance reporting, timetabling, testing, grading, and reporting on student progress.

When schools employ Aboriginal teachers, adopt active programs and pedagogies that involve students and parents directly in learning situations, or adopt band control, students' confidence and success tend to increase, with higher expectations observed for them than are found in conventional classrooms (Wall and Madak, 1991: 49; Wilson, 1994: 309). Sawyer (1991: 103) observes that we can better serve Aboriginal students, "when we as instructors abandon the attempt to identify a definitive answer to the question 'How do Native students learn?' for answers to the question 'What teaching accommodations have proven most effective in helping Native students succeed in educational settings?'"

- The strongest benefits, both in provincial/territorial and First Nations schools, are observed when Aboriginal culture is incorporated holistically or integrated through all aspects of programming and school culture, regardless of improvements fostered by specific initiatives or interventions (Archibald, 1995: 352-355; Assembly of First Nations, 1988: 77; Corson, 1996: 98-99; Green, 1990: 38; Kehoe and Echols, 1994: 62-63; Haig-Brown *et al.*, 1997; White, 1996: 108).

Representation by Aboriginal people – Employment and education equity programs,

elders programs, band controlled education, and other initiatives have increased the number of Aboriginal people employed and active within education systems, but there is still significant underrepresentation of Aboriginal personnel as teachers, staff, and administrators in nearly all jurisdictions (Mills Consulting, 1992: 19-20; Saskatchewan Education, 1991: 7; Sub-Committee on Aboriginal Education, 1996: 8-9). However, aside from selected case studies, there is no systematic data base to indicate the full range of employment by Aboriginal teachers in school systems in Canada, and more importantly, there is even less examination of the specific positions, roles and duties Aboriginal personnel perform.

Educators are "cultural brokers" who shape students' educational experiences by mediating between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal worlds (Stairs, 1995: 146-147). As with cultural programming and content, the presence of Aboriginal teachers and other school personnel is significant as a sign of acceptance of the Aboriginal community as well as for the direct skills and benefits that they can provide (Assembly of First Nations, 1988: 154). Aboriginal teachers, like students, generally express commitment to mainstream educational values and objectives, but their retention rates and career patterns are adversely affected by experiences of racism and discrimination, stereotyping or isolation as a "Native specialist," devaluation of credentials received from Aboriginal teacher education programs, and marginalization (Carr and Klassen, 1997: 76-77; Hesch, 1995: 192; McNinch, 1994: 5ff.; NORTEP 1987: 16).

- Regardless of their social and cultural backgrounds, teachers and administrators who are regarded as most successful in working with Aboriginal students and communities are those who maintain active engagement with their learners and learning contexts. This involvement requires continual sensitivity to cultural and social factors outside of as well as within the school setting, open and caring relations with students, and the ability to serve as facilitator and counsellor rather than purely as instructor (Campbell, 1991: 109-110; Solomon, 1991; Taras, 1996: 64-65; Wilson, 1994: 311-312).

Resources – While sufficient resources are key components for quality education, resource considerations must not be reduced to matters of quantity. Many of the features of education that contribute to success among Aboriginal learners are time and labour intensive, often having relatively small and specialized target groups, so they do require considerable financial outlays over and above standard educational costs. However, many current educational practices and expenditure patterns (e.g., funding designated for

specified capital projects or information technology initiatives) often contain conditions that restrict flexibility and divert resources from more fundamental needs.

- Adequate resources and funding for Aboriginal education must ensure that basic and special needs are covered, with sufficient flexibility to respond to changing real needs.

Governance issues – Despite consensus that Aboriginal people must become more centrally involved in all levels and aspects of education, the concept and practice of "Indian control of Indian education" has proven to be highly elusive and fragmented (Hampton and Wolfson, 1994: 92-95; Paquette, 1986: 86ff.). Whatever philosophical orientations are adopted by specific observers (see Assembly of First Nations, 1994: 1; Canada, 1997: 26-27; Goddard, 1993), the reality is that a dual system of education – with First Nations and other Aboriginal authorities increasingly responsible for education but also with significant proportions of Aboriginal children and youth continuing their schooling in provincial/territorial jurisdictions – is likely to coexist for some time along with a wide array of alternative arrangements.

Serious problems have made it difficult to accomplish effective control even where there is agreement in principle. These include restrictive guidelines and practices that govern tuition agreements between bands and provincial/territorial school districts, terms of reference for Alternative Funding Arrangements for devolution of control from the federal to First Nations jurisdiction, and Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development funding formulae; the absence of clear guidelines in other policy and jurisdictional areas; inability to ensure equitable distribution of resources or to guarantee assured spending on key educational priorities; and lack of flexibility to allow bands or tribal councils to develop long-term educational goals and plans (Brady, 1991: 70-71; Burns, 1998: 58-59; Goddard, 1997: 220; Hall, 1992: 64; Henley and Young, 1990: 201-202; Sub-Committee on Aboriginal Education, 1996: 48). Factors like the absence of parental representation in provincial/territorial school governance, fiscal contraint, public demands for accountability, and bureaucratic procedures that clash with principles of "indigenization" can undermine First Nations governance and delay further efforts to achieve effective Aboriginal control over education (Brady, 1995: 358; Fleras, 1996: 165; Hylton, 1994: 44; Kirkness and Bowman, 1992; Mills Consulting, 1992; 1993; Paquette, 1989), especially if that control is regarded as an immediate end rather than an ongoing process (Taylor, Crago and McAlpine, 1993). An additional issue is the growing proliferation and diversity of educational jurisdictions that can prohibit the sharing of common issues, new materials,

and other resources required to advance educational success.

- Regardless of the extent to which agreement on principles of Aboriginal control over education exists, it is essential to alleviate real obstacles that have hampered the achievement of effective control and that have produced varying consequences for diverse social groups.

Community context and participation – The educational success of Aboriginal people requires strong and flexible ties between formal educational institutions and Aboriginal communities (McAlpine and Herodier, 1994: 140), taking into account not only wider diversity, but also effective ways in which to bring Aboriginal people into the school planning and delivery process.

- Education systems and their personnel must be sensitive to special needs and forms of diversity in communities in which Aboriginal people live, including the composition of their membership, the values and orientations of their members, and the particular circumstances that prevail from one situation to another.

Alternative Education at Work

The next sections move from general factors to specific instances of schooling models that respond to the needs of children and youth in a variety of socio-cultural settings. The successful schools adjust to the needs of students who are at once economically disadvantaged and often lack the day to day supports that we all require. These schools also provide for the educational, social, and personal needs of students who do not fit into the system of standardized education or do not match the standard learner profile. Typically, the students in these schools have levels of achievement that would be considered inadequate by conventional educational indicators. The successes of the schools indicate that a flexible, more holistic system of learning is appropriate and highly positive for students who would otherwise "fall through the cracks."

Voices of Aboriginal Youth In School

We first outline some of our research findings (Schissel and Wotherspoon, 1998) that incorporate the opinions of Aboriginal children and youth (many of them in alternative schools) with respect to their school experiences and their understandings of what

constitutes a desirable school environment. Based on their singular and collective sentiments, the following points frame the social, cultural and educational needs of students. These recommendations go beyond curricular changes and address larger issues of well-being, school governance, and physical and emotional safety.

Cultural Education and Language - The students who feel the safest, the most comfortable, and the most enthused are those who receive some form of cultural education in school. Whether cultural studies are a validation of the cultural lives of the students or whether they engender pride and interest in community, they seem to foster individual empowerment. Language training is fundamental to personal empowerment through cultural education. The students consistently feel that traditional languages should be given credence at least equal to the two charter languages in Canada. Further, students often express the importance of Elders in helping them get and maintain a sense of balance inside and outside of school and that training by Elders greatly enhance the acquisition of both informal and formal education.

Teacher Quality - Good teachers dramatically enhance students' enthusiasm for learning. However, students also know full well which teachers create a negative atmosphere. Admittedly, this is a sensitive and complex issue, but the damage that an insensitive, intolerant or aggressive teacher can do dramatically outweighs the benefits that most good teachers generate. Teacher sensitivity to socio-economic and cultural conditions is both integral to education and a fundamental human rights issue. The students also observe that, although cultural sensitivity is fundamental to positive teaching, teachers do not need to be of Aboriginal ancestry in order to demonstrate cultural sensitivity.

Educational Aspirations – We observe, among Aboriginal students, that those in both elementary and high school have an overwhelming desire to attend some postsecondary educational institution, especially university. Such high aspirations, however, often do not translate into reality, especially for rural and northern Aboriginal students, who are disadvantaged when postsecondary education is limited to urban contexts. The students express a desire to know more about the practical realities of postsecondary education, including funding potential, the educational requirements of postsecondary institutions and programs for Aboriginal students, the social reality of university and college life for Aboriginal students, and the reality of moving from rural to urban areas. The students also

feel that they would be more likely to obtain postsecondary education if they were offered a mechanism of decentralized learning and distance education to more isolated areas.

Racism and Discrimination – One successful alternative high school we observed makes a concerted effort to incorporate problems of intolerance and discrimination into its curriculum and into regular talking circles. The students are constantly reminded of how racism and discrimination, in overt and subtle ways, steal into everyone's life inside and outside school. Furthermore, the teachers constantly discuss how issues of discrimination are to be handled. The constant reminders for staff and students create ongoing awareness of how prejudice and racism damage individuals.

Time Flexibility - Given that many students express how time commitments outside the school make it difficult to meet the time requirements of attendance and assignments in school, students recommend that both alternative and mainstream schools deal with lateness in a less punitive way than has been practiced in the past and that, where possible, schools should adjust the time requirements based on individual need and the exigencies of students' lives outside school. Too often, students indicate they left school or were asked to leave based on their inability or unwillingness to meet the time requirements of the formal school curriculum.

Social and Economic Sensitivity – Students are sensitive to the problems of poverty, abuse, violence, and parenting, demonstrating how profoundly socio-economic problems affect their emotional as well as physical well-being. The likelihood they will achieve their amazingly high educational aspirations is based, in part, on experiences outside school. For many students, the balance between success and failure is delicate. Successful schools (especially in alternative settings), address the familial and community exigencies of the students by showing tolerance and understanding for individual misconduct that results from life circumstances, and by being involved in rectifying damaging conditions. Several high schools, for example, have cost recovery breakfast and lunch programs that meet the immediate needs of the students. In addition, two alternative schools incorporate parenthood training and drug abuse counselling as part of the lifeskills program. These programs, while somewhat specific to certain populations, indicate that the daily experiences of students can be incorporated into a holistic learning context.

From our preliminary investigations (focused especially on alternative schools in

inner-city environments), two things are especially obvious with respect to schools' effectiveness for marginalized and high risk children, youth, and adults. First, for many of the students who have been in trouble with the law, the school is the only place where they can deal with the issues that resulted in their legal problems. Second, effective schools deal with the transition from childhood/adolescence to adulthood as a fundamental priority, pointing to the deep importance of effective mentoring. The mentoring process that is characteristic of effective schools includes not only training and the transmission of knowledge, but also the creation of a mutual, idea-sharing context in which the mentor listens as much as s/he speaks. Many of the marginalized students in these schools are missing in their lives a concerned and tolerant audience, a physical and emotional safe haven, a place where what they say is as important as what they learn, a chance to influence their life circumstances, an opportunity to make explanation and reparation, and a chance to see and emulate responsible, ever-present adults.

The last point is critical. Through interaction and emulation with caring adults, marginalized youths develop the skills for the day to day tasks that facilitate living, understanding what constitutes responsible parenting and responsible intimacy, overcoming the frustration that lands them in trouble, and learning to trust people in authority. Three case studies illustrate how all these factors are combined in successful schools.

Case 1 – Education, Justice and Community in an Inner-City High School

Making the Spirit Dance Within: Joe Duquette High School and an Aboriginal Community (Haig-Brown *et al.*, 1997) is a significant study of an alternative inner city school whose student body is primarily of First Nations ancestry. Many of the students at the school are "high risk" in that they are disaffiliated from family and community and are relatively susceptible to confrontations with the legal system. The mandate, as a result, is to provide a democratic, fair environment in which students can find safety, tolerance, egalitarian treatment, and a non-judgmental, non-punitive place to stay and learn, at least during the day. Significantly, the school is conducted within a spiritual/cultural context that frames the day to day activities of the students and staff.

In essence, what the school attempts to do is create an adult-like world in which autonomy, responsibility, respect, and enfranchisement are the cornerstones. To do this, the school staff creates an atmosphere of mutual respect and equality, reflecting on their

own behaviour and demonstrating respectfulness categorically. Teachers demonstrate the types of conduct they expect in their students by apologizing when necessary, and by respecting the privacy of the students against other teachers and against the outside world. At times, this entails not "ratting" on a student to other teachers or the principal, making the school a sanctuary against the outside, especially from the police; although the school does cooperate with the law in terms of alternative measures and other relevant issues, it does not allow the law to enter into the confines of the school. Further, the atmosphere of community is fostered by a philosophy in which the school belongs to everyone; the symbols of authority and the use of "pulling rank" are minimized. To this end, the school does not have a staff room. When the staff meet, they do so in full view of the entire school community and decisions about the continuance of a student are made collectively.

Despite the fact that Joe Duquette High School is an innovative, community- oriented school, like all schools it necessarily has to draw the line at extreme behaviour. It does not, however, use punishment or intimidation to handle extreme situations. Regarding issues of bullying and violence, the violating student is given a choice: either make the effort to apologize and convince the victim that he or she will be safe from now on, or leave. Given that school is the only safe haven from the world and the last resort for some students, reparation is often the outcome, although expulsion does occur. In keeping with the philosophy of community and mutual investment in the school, students who are expelled are welcomed back when ready to accept the community standards. Once again, choice and respect – not punishment - are the baselines.

While there are problems to overcome, the school has managed to provide a respectful, egalitarian environment in which punishment is absent and in which teachers are active role models for the kinds of behaviour they expect. Issues of racism, sexism, and class discrimination, which are common in most schools, are not treated as categories but subsumed under the umbrella of respect for persons as individuals. When treated like real persons, the students respond positively.

Joe Duquette High School provides a strong example of the kinds of mutuality that need to occur between education and social justice. Alternative schools, in their mandates to provide alternative measures to the justice system, strive to promote egalitarian, non-authoritarian relationships with adults (essentially figures of authority) and ultimately promote interdependency, not absolute dependency. Students have a good deal of latitude in decisions about themselves, the curriculum, and the extent of their relationships with adults. The "top-down" relationships that youths in trouble with the law receive in the

justice system, for example, are replaced with non-punitive, "social/professional" alliances that provide young people with the mentoring to become responsible adults. A blending of alternative education and law takes the legal system away from punishment and into the realm of healing.

Case 2 – A Northern Dene Community

Community is fundamental to Aboriginal-based education systems. As Joe Duquette School illustrates, schools can serve as surrogate communities, especially in urban centres where students and experiences are often disconnected. In isolated rural centres, on the other hand, the concept of community is no less important, but it derives from an already existing cultural solidarity and tradition. Ryan (1995) describes how the Dene Community of Lac La Martre in the Northwest Territories has fused culture, education, and justice into a singular cosmology that focuses on formal education, cultural apprenticeship and a collective morality. Most importantly, the Dene community at Lac La Martre has organized a Community Education Committee, which ensures that formal education of both children and adults coincides with the cultural and physical needs of a highly subsistence-based community. To this end, the Committee, based somewhat on the findings of Ryan's participatory action research, has recommended to the community to refashion the education system to make the Dogrib language a priority in school and in the community. Further, the community, on the advice of the committee, is implementing cultural instruction by elders in school and extending the classroom to the land where instruction by elders and by formal teachers continues onto extended field trips. Constant elder-youth contact is envisioned as a fundamental education vehicle and the maintenance of the Dogrib language is the framework around which such education is built.

The traditional community in Lac La Martre, with its focus on holistic education, culture/language and community, is not unlike the urban alternative school which tries to blend cultural learning, formal learning, and a sense of connectedness. The philosophies and priorities are the same although the external and internal environments are different. It appears, nonetheless, that despite geography, the things that make education a holistic exercise that prepares students for more than just the world of work are basic.

Case 3 - Marginality, Disadvantage and Risk in a Community Elementary School

Princess Alexandria School is a community-based elementary school in a Saskatoon inner city area where the population is relatively poor and more transient than average. Both the school and the community deal with day to day issues that are characteristic of communities that are on the margins of the society. As many of the parents in the community are struggling economically and personally, students tend to be disadvantaged and in need when they enter school

The school has responded in a rather profound and remarkable way to the issues that students face. First, it has abandoned punishment as a disciplinary option and replaced it with a system of reparation and responsibility. To this end, the staff are prepared to accept "acting out" and verbal abuse knowing that these behaviours arise generally from traumatic life experiences. Because the staff at the school either self-select or are handpicked, they are aware of the needs of children who require exceptional nurturing.

Standardized education presents a problem for community schools like Princess Alexandria because of the distinctive needs of the students. The school has responded by creating a flexible curriculum in which the students are assessed on the basis of individual progress and success. This essentially human rights approach to education (Schissel, 1997) involves a general understanding not only of the emotional needs of the students but also of their immediate physical and economic needs. The school responds, with the help of the community, by providing breakfast and lunch programs and by providing "work for wages" opportunities around the school for the older children. Furthermore, the school attempts to create a physical environment that is safe and secure. Recesses are replaced with two periods of physical education to keep students "off the street." The schoolyard is maintained by custodial staff who are involved in environmental programs that include student involvement in designing and maintaining the school property. This caretaker involvement is rather unique in that it draws on people from the local community who volunteer their time on weekends to teach ecology classes to students and maintain the schoolyard with student help. This exemplifies how the school and local community members come together to create an educational environment that works beyond the formal school context.

The school, composed mostly of students of Aboriginal ancestry and visible minority students, incorporates cultural traditions into its curriculum, including Native dance, spirituality, and art and cross-cultural learning. Issues of trauma and sexuality are addressed in a highly direct and non-accusatory way. The school meets as a community of

children and adults to respond to issues of physical and sexual abuse more generally. For example, when one eleven-year old girl had been sexually assaulted outside the school, the teachers, all the children, a social worker, and an elder all met to discuss issues of assault and abuse and to destigmatize the victim. The purpose of such activity is to deal with specific traumatic incidents by placing them in the context of general issues of safety and security and, in so doing, to allow the trauma of the victim to be shared by the community. These efforts permit the student to return to school in an atmosphere of understanding rather than one of pity and fear.

The school also deals with issues of sexuality and sexually transmitted diseases in the same community context. They are treated as larger social issues that involve safety, mutual respect, safe sex at a general level, and respect for gender, avoiding a moral tone of blame (Schissel, 1997). Gender, sex, and sexuality, which are often ignored or discussed in a circumspect fashion in conventional school systems, are dealt with directly as public issues of collective concern.

Conclusion

Our analysis has highlighted the need to integrate an understanding of schooling for Aboriginal people with an analysis of structural and economic factors. Just as these factors have contributed to processes of Aboriginal cultural erosion, they must be examined for opportunities for cultural and linguistic revival. Our discussion points to the need for an education system that situates itself at the heart of all forms of advocacy for children, teaching children the value of their voices by respecting those voices rather than attempting to silence them. This can only take place in an organizational atmosphere that understands that schooling is a vehicle for social justice. Their role is only partially intellectual development. They are arenas of justice, personal development, collective action, and individual achievement. They are also, in many cases, safe houses. Educational policies and practices must be sufficiently flexible and sensitive to the circumstances of its students, oriented to making their lives better by providing a context which consists of

- emotional and physical safety;
- achievable day to day tasks;
- democratic education;
- a forum for personal and collective justice; and
- a comfortable physical environment.

To accomplish these ideals, it is necessary for schools to become better places for all participants by bringing the community in, providing life education, extending education beyond standard hours, and combining justice and education.

Advancing the Policy and Research Agenda

Several issues emerge from the preceding analysis that give rise to further research needs and policy considerations.

- What kinds of education indicators are required to develop a complete understanding of the combined impact of social, processual, academic, and outcome features of educational success? How can alternative measures of educational experience (like emotional security, school satisfaction, and development of life skills) be combined with traditional indicators to create a holistic measurement (and causal understanding) of educational success?

- How can government departments and ministries and school jurisdictions at all levels, including First Nations, better coordinate their efforts to collect and share data on key education indicators, information about new initiatives and materials, and other issues of common concern?

- To what extent can modifications to accommodate Aboriginal students and communities be incorporated into provincial/territorial education systems and adult education programs?

- To what extent is the development of alternative schools or school systems essential for Aboriginal student success, and to what extent should these be publicly supported and funded? What forms of mutual learning and cooperation among systems have been attempted and implemented, and with what consequences?

- What kinds of relationships must education institutions enter into with other public, private and community agencies in order to foster educational success among Aboriginal people? Can schooling combine the mandates of the justice, social welfare, health, and education systems to foster holistic education that is appropriate for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students? What kinds of factors promote or detract from these arrangements?

- To what extent are the innovations that contribute to holistic education in alternative and Aboriginal schools applicable to the education of non-Aboriginal students and adult learners?

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